

Thought and Language. Lev S. Vygotsky (newly revised, translated, and edited by Alex Kozulin). Cambridge (Massachusetts): The M.I.T. Press, 1986, 287 pages.

Reviewed by René van der Veer, University of Leiden, The Netherlands

The ideas of the Soviet researcher Lev Vygotsky enjoy a steadily growing popularity in American psychology. In the field of developmental psychology, in particular, his pioneering work concerning the importance of social interaction and the so-called "zone of proximal development" is now well-known. Unfortunately, the serious student of Vygotsky's work has only a limited number of his writings available in English. The student has to rely on various translated articles and fragments of books, unless he or she undertakes the cumbersome task of learning Russian. It is true, two full books have been translated into English in the past, namely *Thought and Language* (1962) and *The Psychology of Art* (1971), but the latter is of little importance for an understanding of Vygotsky the psychologist and the former is inadequate for reasons we will mention below. We thus must conclude that the American reader is not in the best position to study Vygotsky's work seriously, unless authoritative translations and reliable monographs will become available. The excellent work done by American scholars like Wertsch and Cole does not significantly change this picture.

It is therefore with great pleasure that one welcomes any new or improved translations of Vygotsky's writings. Recently the M.I.T. Press published a newly revised and edited version of *Thought and Language* (1986). The rationale for this publication was the fact that the old 1962 translation by Hanfmann and Vakar was heavily edited and abridged. These translators, acting in the spirit of ghost-writers, had omitted all philosophical digressions, repetitions, references to little known researchers, quotations, etc. The result was a book which had little in common with the original.

Before I review Alex Kozulin's new translation let me say a few words about *Thought and Language* and about what one may expect from a scholarly edition of this work. In the first place it should be said that Vygotsky's classic, for various reasons, is not easy to translate. One problem is that Vygotsky often informally refers to his contemporaries both in the Soviet Union and abroad. This means that one has to identify these researchers and supply biographical notes when they are not known to modern readers. This is not always easy, as Vygotsky had the unpleasant habit of sometimes quoting researchers without explicitly mentioning their names. It also means, in my opinion, that one should translate quotations from non-Russian sources anew to avoid distortions. A further problem the translator has to face concerns Vygotsky's style of writing. It is full of figurative language, rhetoric, references to novels and plays, and repetitions. A faithful translation should try to capture these idiosyncracies. All this means that a translation of Vygotsky's writings requires a tremendous effort and a broad knowledge of the history of psychology.

It is my opinion that the 1986 edition of *Thought and Language* is not a scholarly edition in the sense sketched above. It is much better than the 1962 edition, but still far from perfect. Kozulin's lengthy new introduction to the book is of excellent quality. In 45 pages he presents a readable and accurate overview of Vygotsky's life and works. The provided notes are also generally very helpful. Kozulin was able to trace many of the books and articles to which Vygotsky referred. A minor problem here, however, is that most foreign names and book titles have been misspelled. But my main problem with the new edition is the quality of the translation. Kozulin rightly criticizes the 1962 edition because it "was marred by omissions made by the translators and editors set on removing those portions of Vygotsky's work . . . that they perceived as redundant and obsolete." But on the next page he states that in the new edition "substantial portions of the 1962 translation have been retained" and that he "departed from Vygotsky's text when it repeats itself." To my taste this is an unsatisfactory approach: it would have been much better (and perhaps easier!) to start from scratch with the new translation. The result of Kozulin's half-hearted approach is that many of the mistakes of the 1962 edition are still present: Russian quotations and references have been omitted. Also, quotations from non-Russian sources have not been translated anew and Vygotsky's style of writing has not been followed closely. In short, in my opinion this is still an abridged version of the original book.

I will concisely illustrate my opinion by discussing Kozulin's translation of the final passage of Vygotsky's book. (In total I carefully checked some 30 pages of the translation using, as Kozulin did, the 1934 Russian edition). My rough translation of the final passage of *Thought and Language* reads as follows:

If "language is as ancient as consciousness," if "language indeed is the practical consciousness, which exists for other people and, consequently, also for myself," if "the curse of matter, the curse of moving layers of air from the beginning hangs over pure consciousness," then it is clear that not only thought, but the development of consciousness as a whole is connected with the development of the word. Actual investigations show at every step that the word plays a central role in consciousness as a whole and not in its separate functions. The word is a thing in consciousness, in the words of Feuerbach, that is absolutely impossible for one person and possible for two. It is the most direct expression of the historical nature of human consciousness.

Consciousness is reflected in the word as the sun in a small drop of water. The word relates to consciousness as a small world to a large one, as a living cell to the organism, as an atom to the universe. Indeed, it is a small world of consciousness. The meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness.

This may not be perfect English, but it shows how much of the original text Kozulin left out. The problem is that none of the italicized words was translated. I fail to see why these words and lines should be omitted. I also do not understand why Kozulin left out all quotation marks in the above passage. The result is that the general reader is led to think that Vygotsky is developing his own line of thought here, whereas in fact he is quoting Marx and Engels. I understand that Kozulin may not have recognized these words about the relation between language and consciousness as quotes from *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1978, p. 30), but it is certainly no solution to omit the quotation marks.

What this means is that we are still only half-way. The now published edition of *Thought and Language* is decidedly better than the earlier one, but we are far from having an authoritative translation. In this sense American psychology is lagging behind other countries. Excellent translations have been available in various European languages, such as German (Wygotski, 1964) and Danish (Vygotsky, 1982) for years.

These translations also rightly translate the original title (*Myslenie i rec'*) of Vygotsky's book as *Thinking and Speech*. It is to be hoped that American psychology in the near future will also make the step from (an abridged) *Thought and Language* to a fully translated *Thinking and Speech*.

References

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